

INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE & PEACEBUILDING

In any war, the majority of the population does not participate in fighting. Instead they are victims of its threat to their lives and livelihood. Within the international community there is growing sense of obligation to protect these civilians. This commitment was first made with the establishment of the International Red Cross in 1863. This has expanded tremendously since the Second World War and the creation of the United Nations system. Today there are many international humanitarian NGOs as well as UN agencies with a mandate to provide shelter, food, education and security for people living inside armed conflicts.



These agencies are rightly praised for their dedication and capacity to provide much needed relief. Without their help, the suffering caused by war would be higher. However, this comes with complications that inevitably arise when an outside organization enters a conflict situation. International agencies have access to funding and resources. With that comes a corresponding level of influence and power.

Critics complain that, however good their intentions, aid agency staff can make mistakes, as they do not understand the complexities of the political situations in which they work. In some cases their actions have fuelled the war they are trying to stop. In others their approach has clashed with local ways of dealing with conflict. Western notions of development can be at odds with the priorities set by other cultures. Countries weakened by war are likely to rely on the advice of outsiders rather than having faith in local ways of being. Countries ridden with huge debt loads can become overly dependent on the resources international agencies have to offer.

As young peacebuilders, it is important for us to understand these issues. In working for the future of our countries, we must analyze the forces that are shaping that development. We need to recognize the cause-effect connections of these interventions. This helps us to take advantage of international assistance without undermining the ways and values of our cultures.

“This picture represents freedom being taken away from young people. Not any ethnic group - it is everyone. It is for the small countries which always have war and the big countries that make the rules for us and tell us what to do.

Other people shouldn't make our future, we should. People who haven't got money - all the doors are closed for them. They have nothing to do, nothing to say. So they lose hope for themselves, hope for their future and hope for their community.”

Zvornick Youth Group

THE IMPACT OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

A DISCUSSION WITH CAMBODIAN YOUTH

Q. Has the international community had a big impact on Cambodia?

A. Yes. The first influence would be the UN troops who came to Cambodia to help with the election and of course they brought HIV /AIDS. That was a big influence. Then also the number of prostitutes really increased because of the troops that arrived in 1993.

The international community wanted to rebuild Cambodia as fast as possible so that we could live in peace and forget all this that had happened. And so we thought, “OK these people have come to help us, so we should welcome them.”

The International NGOs started a lot of programs with human rights. They wanted to strengthen the idea of democracy and human rights. They wanted us to have a very perfect constitution, but they found that it was quite difficult to deal with the old ways of communism. You see things had changed very fast.

When they came they brought a lot of money. They threw the money at us. Everyone was happy to catch it and unfortunately a lot of money went into people’s personal pockets. But they also gave a lot of money to our government for development.

We knew that if we want their money then we had to follow the international community. Also they understand that HIV/AIDS came from them and also some inappropriate culture such as pornography and video, something that was not in keeping with Cambodian culture and did damage to Cambodian culture.

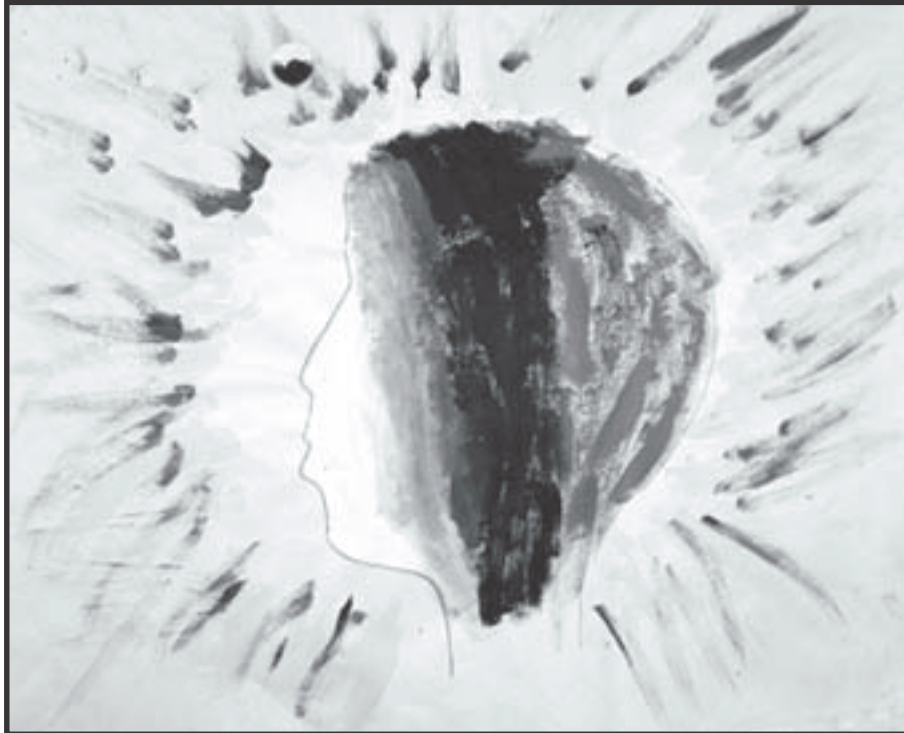
Some Cambodians look at the international community and see that they have affected us and that there have been bad parts with that. But for most it is more balanced – good influences and bad.

One part that isn’t good about the international community is that sometimes there can be problems because everything comes from them. The perspective on our country is theirs. This means that when you are looking for funding you cannot create your program with your ideas and sense of what your country needs and how to do something about those needs. Instead, you have to create a program that follows their ideas, their priorities and their ways of understanding the problem and how to deal with it.

For example, you can go and say you want to do something with youth and children’s rights. And they say, “No, sorry we don’t fund that. Your program has to focus on HIV AIDS. That is what we will fund.”

That is not a good point. Sometimes you can feel that they look at us as if we are low-educated people and everything has to be organized by international people.

The good part is that the international community can help to control the corruption. When they throw some money they can put pressure on the government. They can say, “OK ,if you want money then you have to achieve these goals.” So it puts pressure on our government to implement certain things that are important. It is good that our government has to hold meetings in front of the international donors to report what they do.



THE COLOURS OF MY SELF PORTRAIT

“On the inside you see the white. It is for my good feelings and that I don’t fight with others. The red is for my worries. The black is for my sadness because I don’t have my parents - both of them are dead. On the outside of the outline you see some yellow. This for the help we get from the NGOs. The other colours are to show my hatred for the SPDC.”